

Tenth Anniversary of Assumption Indian School

(Sermon de Mgr Routhier)

(February 1, 1961)

« *Fecit mihi magna qui potens est et sanctum nomen
ejus* ».

« *The all powerful has done great things for me
and Holy is His Name* ».

(ST. LUKE, Ch. 1, 49)

The words of the text I have just quoted are those chosen by the Church at the Communion Prayer for the Feast of the Assumption. Even if they apply more immediately to the Blessed Virgin, Patroness of this school opened in 1951, they also aptly apply to the Institution whose tenth anniversary of existence we celebrate today.

We are happy to note that most of those who partook in its inauguration are still among the living and some have the joy of attending the commemoration ceremony of today. However, while raising our hearts in thanksgiving during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, it would please me that you be not unmindful of Father Bernard Rainville who has gone to his reward but who probably got his death stroke in the unmitigated hardships borne during the building of the structure in which we presently find ourselves. Likewise, would it be agreeable to me did you keep in mind Father Rainville's nephew who also worked extremely hard,

Paul Plouffe, who will be ordained to the Priesthood in June of this year. I am sure that both the school staff, the Slavey people and school children will remember the missionary whose young life was tragically snapped in the exercise of his ministry among you, Father Giosuè Berbenni. Our gratitude also goes out to all those Priests, Brothers and Sisters, to the laymen and laywomen who laboured in the difficult organization of education here and to the many friends of the mission who have worked at Habay or Assumption. May God bless them for their devotedness, their sympathy and their encouragement.

Among the pioneer missionaries who worked among the Slavey people, we recall Father Dupin, the late Bishop Jousard and Father Le Treste. At Meander River, formerly Upper Hay River, they sowed the seeds of faith in those who came from Hay Lakes. Father Habay, now a grand old man of 85, the first builder of the church at Hay Lakes, dedicated to St. Stephen, has not thought it prudent to be with us for the occasion. Father Arbet who had learned the Slavey language in the McKenzie Territory and then was assigned as first resident at Hay Lakes with Brother Dugas, have not found it possible to be with us and are labouring in other fields of the Master.

We would also appreciate that you keep in mind as a testimony of gratitude for their labours, those many devoted Sisters of Providence who gave the best that was in them to assist in instructing and forming the youth of the Slavey Reserve.

It may not be inappropriate to give you a brief summary of the history of evangelization of this territory and consign the efforts made to assure the education of its youth.

I trust this will be of interest both to our Indian

people and to the Whites who have worked here or been sympathetic to the work carried on.

The Slavey Indians are believed to be one of six branches of the DENE TRIBE which comprises the Chipewyan, Slaveys, Beavers, Dogribs, Rabbitskins, and Loucheux. The word « *Dene* » signifies « *man* », and was considered a tribute to the manliness of the Indians of these Tribes. It is thought that the Slavey Tribe of the Dene Indians was at one time a powerful tribe of warriors and hunters and occupied all the country within the regions between Great Slave Lake and Lesser Slave Lake. However, in their wars with the Cree Indians, they were gradually pushed north and confined to the area which they now occupy in the McKenzie Territory and in the north-west of Alberta. They associated closely with the Beavers along the Hay River and through intermarriage of Slavey and Beaver and some Chipewyan, their language became an amalgamation of Slavey, Beaver and in some small proportion of Chipewyan.

The missionaries brought to them the message of Christ much later than to most other Indian groups of Western Canada because of their comparative isolation from the main streams and frequented routes, or trails. The first missionaries to come in contact with them came through the McKenzie River, the Liard, the Nelson, and the Petitot, or Black River. Bishop Jousard spoke to them in Chipewyan, Father Le Treste in Beaver, and Father Arbet in Slavey. It was however from Fort Vermilion that the most determined efforts were made to bring the faith to our Slavey people. For a long time the only Hudson Bay store was in Fort Vermilion to which the Indians from Hay Lakes and Upper Hay brought their furs once a year. The missionaries at the Fort met these Indians and the Parish Registers of Fort Vermilion

mention the names of a good many Slavey Indians. Father LAITY, O.M.I., visited the Slaveys at Upper Hay River between the years 1883 and 1889. In 1890 Father Joussard, later Bishop, records that in late October of that year he visited what is now Meander River. He continued to visit this Post every fall for many years, at first with few results but gradually most of the Indians accepted Baptism and were instructed in the essentials of their Catholic faith. Only in 1902 do the records show a long list of names of Slaveys in the Baptismal Registers.

In October 1909, Father Joussard having been appointed Coadjutor of Bishop Grouard, was succeeded by Father Joseph Le Treste who for the next few years visited Upper Hay each year. Father Joussard had built a small log house at Upper Hay, Father Le Treste the second house there. In 1912, however, Father Habay, then Superior at Fort Vermilion, finding few Indians at Upper Hay, continued further west as far as Hay Lakes where he discovered a great many Indian people. He continued this yearly visit, baptizing adults and children and marrying Indian couples. Only in November 1927, did Father Habay bring along building materials and a construction crew to erect a church at Hay Lakes. Because of the extremely cold weather, the building remained unfinished until the following year. This church was dedicated to St. Stephen of Hungary. Because of his limited stay among the Indians — Father Habay could remain with them only a week or two at a time — Father left the Indians books of prayers and hymns and spent a few ways giving religious instruction. Father well realized that this was insufficient, and he was anxious that a missionary be stationed at Hay Lakes for the increasing group of Indian people. They had no school and feared to send

their children to the Fort Vermilion Residential School.

In 1930 Father brought along two Sisters, Sister Charles Elisée, Superior, and Sister Synclitique who took along some medicine to care for the sick and small objects of piety which they distributed especially among the children. This first visit of the Sisters was greatly appreciated by the Indian people and it gave the parents a strong desire to have a school for their own children on their Reserve. However, as we well know, neither personnel nor finances could be obtained for the construction of a school whose necessity was understood by all.

In 1933, Father Quémeneur built a residence at Upper Hay and from there visited the Indians at Hay Lakes. However, it was realized that the larger group of Indians was stationed at Hay Lakes and not at Upper Hay and a resident missionary was seriously needed at Hay Lakes.

In 1940, Father Arbet, a native of France, was appointed its first resident missionary. The Indians spoke to him again of the need of a school. The visit of the Sisters had impressed them and the superiority of the children in other Tribes of Indians contributed to this desire. The main difficulty in the erection of a school, however, remained the isolation of Hay Lakes and the lack of decent means of communication. It is difficult today to estimate the hard life led by Father Arbet and Brother Dugas during their stay at Hay Lakes. In studying the possibility of building a school, Father Arbet soon realized that it had to be built not in the lowlands around Hay Lakes but on higher land which could be found on the banks of the stream called Gunn River or Sousa Creek. Moreover, it had to be proven that the soil was sufficiently

fertile to assure the subsistence of the school pupils and personnel.

Father Arbet and Brother Dugas cleared a fairly large tract of land, seeded and harvested oats, wheat and vegetables. Their toil was rewarded with an abundant crop. However, the Vicariate did not have sufficient finances to build a residential school, the only kind of school which could furnish proper nourishment to the children and restore the vitality of the population. As a terribly expensive war was then being fought in Europe, no attempt could reasonably be made to bring the Indian Department to consent to the outlay of capital needed for the erection of a school which could house at least 100 pupils.

Moreover, a goodly number of officials of the Indian Department were opposed to Residential Schools. Such conditions were enough to dampen the hopes of an ordinary man, but not of Father Arbet whose whole life was dedicated to improve the lot of the Indians whom he had been sent to evangelize. He persisted in his determination all through the years, and when in the fall of 1944 I came to visit him at Hay Lakes, he brought to my attention the need of a residential school, as well as Chief Harry Chonkolay made me realize the hopelessness of a population totally illiterate and health conditions worse than I had ever seen in any other Reserve. I was determined I should do everything, even appeal to public opinion, to endeavour to obtain the school from the Indian Department. That fall of 1944 when I went to Ottawa. I brought to the attention of the officials of the Indian Department the hopeless conditions of the Indians, pressed them to come to their assistance, but as the war was still on, I was given no encouragement. Again, in the fall of 1945, I appealed to the Indian Department and for the first

time made them aware how desperate things were. This time the officials assured me that attention would be given to our project of a school as soon as general conditions of the country were stabilized. However, it was only in the fall of 1949, when visiting Hon. James McKinnon, then Minister in charge of Indian Affairs, that I was given the assurance that construction of the new school would start the following spring. Sums had been voted for a residential school at Lower Post, but as the plans prepared by the architects were far too elaborate for the amount of money available, this project was delayed another year and the Minister informed me that the money voted for Lower Post could be transferred to the Hay Lakes Residential School. Immediately architects were put to work to prepare a plan and a sketch of the plan was sent me in early December. Father Beuglet and myself who were accepted as contractors for the Episcopal Corporation, set to finding a building crew and to shipping all necessary material to the site chosen before the break-up of the roads in the spring.

Thus was a huge amount of material gathered here and all through the spring and summer men were flown in to carry on the work. At the end of January 1951, the school was ready for occupancy.

I had been in contact with a Community of Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Ottawa to take over the school and had received a definite reply that they would come as soon as the school was ready. However, as this meant the closing in the East of two houses, one of the Eastern Bishops opposed the closing in his Diocese of one house of the community and made it impossible to open a house here. The only solution which I then saw feasible, was to close down St. Augustine's Mission near Peace River so as to free the Sisters of Providence and have them take over the Assumption School here in Hay La-

kes. This was done in the middle of winter with the gracious consent of the Superiors of Providence, and in early February a group of nine Sisters of Providence were flown in to take on their new responsibilities.

Few people probably realize what enormous problems one has solve in the building and organization of an institution of this kind, away from all ordinary conveniences. Few realize the heavy responsibility of those whose duty it is to maintain it and assure its progress. Through the ten years of its existence, this school of the Assumption has solved its problem as they came along under the guidance of the staff of Fathers, Brothers and Sisters laity. In the early days was new for the children: the environment, the language, sleeping habits, the discipline, the regular attendance in class. In February, of 1951, approximately seventy children were brought to the school. The heavy strain of the transition in the lives of these children seemed sufficient for a break during the Easter season, and they were allowed to return home for the week. After the Easter holidays, only ten came back to school. One began to wonder whether all the work and worry in its establishment had not been in vain. However, through the assistance of Father Arbet and the Indian Agent from Fort Vermilion, a few stragglers were brought back and the school year ended with approximately forty boys and girls. In the following September, practically all the children of school age arrived at the opening of school and since then attendance has never been a problem.

When the school opened in 1951, only two or three little girls knew some English, almost all the children were in Grade 1 and of all ages ranging from 6 to 15. One can hardly realize the enormous amount of work needed by the school staff to teach

them a language entirely foreign to anything they had yet known.

Education is a slow process, and education to a way of life entirely new is slower still. However, it is evident that a gradual transformation has taken place and we can hope that as those first scholars of this institution become parents in turn, their children will be better prepared to take advantage of the benefits which are offered them and themselves to the changing conditions of time.

May we also hope that as the years advance, not only may our Slavey Indians become better instructed in secular knowledge, but better Christians, living in conformity with the ideals that Christ brought to the world. May this wish be realized through the mercy of our Divine Saviour and the Motherly intercession of Our Lady of the Assumption!